THE LEAST OF THESE
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 82
Matthew 25:31–46

"Just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . ,
you did it to me."
Matthew 25:40 (NRSV)

God is in love with us and keeps giving himself to the world— through you and me.
May you continue to be the sunshine of God's love to your people
and thus make your life something beautiful for God.

Mother Teresa
Come Be My Light:
The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta

A friend of mine died recently, Joe Ledwell. Joe was in his late seventies, a grandfather, and for years the pastor of the Homewood Presbyterian Church. He retired ten years ago. Joe was a good and kind, cheerful man, a faithful pastor; his people loved him. So did his colleagues. When he died, I remembered something about Joe that made me respect and admire him even more. For years, once a month, Joe used to go to the cemetery where Cook County buries its unclaimed and unidentified dead: eighteen, twenty, twenty-five per month; people who had been totally forgotten, claimed by no one, known by no one, grieved by no one. The county identifies them by number: #612897, white female; #612900, black male; #644, suburban female Hispanic. Once a month, on the appointed day, Joe used to go to the cemetery and, as the simple pine coffins were placed in a common grave, conduct a memorial service, read scripture, pray, commend them all to the love and mercy of God, the God who knows every one of us, calls us by name, the God who never forgets us even though everybody else has. I loved Joe for that.

I knew Joe for years before I discovered what he was doing once a month. In fact, the only way anyone knew was that the *Tribune* learned about it and put Joe's picture on the front page six years ago. Typically, Joe was embarrassed by the whole thing. The last thing in the world he wanted was a lot of attention. He was surprised by it, was perfectly content doing quietly what he was doing with no attention at all. I loved him for that, too.

One time Jesus said,

> I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink;
> I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing;
> I was in prison and you visited me.

And when he was asked when that happened, he answered,

> Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

It's the third of three stories Jesus told his disciples during the last week of his life. He told a story about ten bridesmaids, five of whom were not prepared for the bridegroom's appearance, and a story about a master who was going on a trip and who gave three servants a portion of his property to manage in his absence (two invested, made a profit, and were rewarded; the third servant buried the money in the ground for safekeeping and was punished).

Jesus is clearly trying to prepare his followers to continue on without him. That context makes these stories particularly important. The third story, according to Matthew, is the last thing Jesus said to his disciples by way of teaching. You might conclude that it is a summary of his teaching. It's about judgment day. All the nations of the world are there. Jesus is the judge: he's separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep are the righteous ones: they inherit the kingdom, the reign of God. The goats are treated harshly —"depart from me," from the reign of God. The point here is not the symbolic imagery of eternal fire but what is actually happening. There is a judgment. Human beings are accountable to God for the way they live their lives.

According to Jesus, the criteria for judgment are simple: "I was hungry and you fed me; thirsty and you gave me drink." "When did we do that, Lord?" the righteous ask. The unforgettable answer: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

And then the counterpoint: "I was hungry and you gave me no food; thirsty and no drink; a stranger and you did not welcome me; naked and you did not clothe me; in prison and you did not visit." "When, Lord? We don't recall any of that happening. We didn't see you hungry, thirsty, cold, and homeless. If we had seen you like that, believe me, we'd have been there, right there with you." The clear, devastating indictment: "Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

Notice that both groups are surprised by all of this. Neither is aware of the eternal significance of what they were doing or not doing. Like Joe Ledwell, the righteous are surprised that what they had been doing merited any attention at all.

It is a very different scene from the popular notion of judgment day. Notice the total absence of the moralisms that many of us were taught were the things God really cared about. There are no lifestyle issues here. The evangelicals of my childhood would be disappointed that Jesus doesn't say anything about smoking or drinking or shopping on Sunday. Contemporary evangelicals would be disappointed that he doesn't say a single word about sex. Conservatives would be disappointed that he doesn't say a word about right doctrine, creeds, baptism, and church membership. No one says anything about conversion. And progressives would be disappointed that there isn't a word here about the environment. This is not to denigrate any of those issues and commitments. It is simply to attend to the text and Jesus' stunningly simple criteria that we are held accountable for our treatment of the least of these.

It is certainly not to denigrate Christian theology, doctrine. The early church needed to develop a way to engage the intellectual currents of the ancient world, the philosophies that prevailed in centers of learning, to say what it believed. One of the great wonders of history is that it did. By the second century, Christian scholars had emerged to engage, teach, and write in Alexandria, Antioch, Rome. Nothing is more important today than the maintenance of rigorous, authentic Christian scholarship capable of participating in the conversation about the critical issues of our day: science and values, economics, war and peace.

But Jesus teaches here that your theology, your creed, aren't going to get you into heaven.

Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton University, tackles the issue in a book, *Beyond Belief*. How, Pagels asks, did Christianity move from a movement characterized by radical love to a system of doctrine? She writes, "I am a historian of religion, and so I wondered when and how becoming a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs" (p. 5).

Pagels argues that, from the beginning, what attracted people to Christianity and to the church was the presence of caring love. She writes,

> Those in need could find immediate, practical help almost anywhere in the empire where great cities, then, as now, were crowded with people [struggling to survive]. Inhabitants of the vast shantytowns that

> surrounded those cities tried to survive by begging, stealing, and prostitution.
>
> . . . Members of the Christian family contributed money to a fund to support orphans abandoned on the streets and garbage dumps. Christians brought food, medicine, and companionship to prisoners forced to work in mines, banished to prison islands, or held in jail.

“Such generosity,” Pagels says, “attracted crowds of newcomers, despite the risks.”

She quotes sociologist Rodney Stark, who observes that when the plague struck, “the only response was to run away, even from members of your own family. But Christians shocked their pagan neighbors by staying to care for the sick and dying.”

“Why did they do it?” Pagels asks. “Jews and Christians believed that God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race and evoked love in return. . . . What God requires is that human beings love one another and offer help—especially to the neediest.”

The evangelical power of Christian love at work in the world: I encountered it when I was for a year representing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). On a visit to Korea, I asked Presbyterian leaders to what they attributed the great success of Christianity, particularly Presbyterianism, in their country. They told me an amazing story. The first Protestant missionaries to Korea arrived in 1885: a Methodist and a Presbyterian, Horace Underwood. Underwood’s wife, Lilias, whom he met and married in Korea, was a physician. When a cholera epidemic struck, the Korean people reacted as people for centuries responded to infectious diseases: by getting away, isolating the victims, and essentially abandoning them to their suffering and death. New Korean Christians stunned their neighbors by visiting and caring for the sick, carrying them to a new hospital they had established. The Korean people called them angels.

When the emperor’s wife fell ill, because of Korean custom she was not allowed to be touched and treated by a man. So the emperor sent for Dr. Lilias Underwood. The empress recovered, and suddenly the climate in Korea changed from suspicion to tolerance, openness, and even interest in these people who seemed to love even the least of these.

One of the most encouraging developments within American Christianity is a new interest on the part of evangelicals in social issues that traditionally have been the concern of mainline, not evangelical, churches. That is changing now, and one of the reasons is the leadership of an inspired and inspiring card-carrying, born-again evangelical by the name of Jim Wallis,

editor of *Sojourners* magazine, founder of an inner-city ministry in Washington, D.C.

In his best-seller, *God's Politics*, he explains how it happened. Wallis attended Trinity Divinity School, a conservative evangelical school in Deerfield. While there, he and a group of friends doing field work in inner-city Chicago became interested in what the Bible has to say about poverty. So they did a study and discovered that one of the defining characteristics of ancient Hebrew religion, Judaism, is the attention it pays to the poor, the weak and vulnerable, the stranger. The heart of the law is Deuteronomy 15: "Do not be hard-hearted toward your needy neighbor; rather open your hand." Psalm 82 is a prayer for the poor, weak, orphans. It's built into Israel's social and political structure, even agricultural policy: a corner of every field is to be left unharvested so the poor have something to eat. Wallis and his friends discovered that one out of sixteen verses in the New Testament is about the poor and care for the poor. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), one out of ten verses is about poverty. In the Gospel of Luke, it is one out of seven. Wallis and his friends were shocked, frankly. Poverty is not a liberal Democrat, mainline church issue; it's a biblical issue. Then they decided to emulate Thomas Jefferson, who cut out of the New Testament all the passages he didn't like, and carefully, tediously cut out of the Bible every reference to the poor. What's left of course is pretty fragile, full of holes. Wallis still has that Bible, takes it with him on his many speaking engagements, likes to hold it up and say, "Here it is. This is the American Bible, full of holes."

We, like those who first hear the story, Jim Wallis says, are stunned to learn that we are accountable not so much for believing the right doctrines, belonging to the right church, espousing the right opinion on social issues, not even so much for our sexual behavior, but by the way we treat the poor.

Wallis's favorite story, which he tells everywhere, is about Mary Glover. I've told it before myself. Mary Glover is a volunteer at the weekly food distribution at the community center Wallis's organization, Sojourners, operates in Washington, D.C. Mary is poor herself, but she is there every Saturday to help. In fact, Mary says the prayer for the volunteers before the center opens. She prays, Jim says, like someone who knows to whom she is talking. It's worth getting out of bed on Saturday just to hear Mary pray. With a long line of hungry, needy people waiting outside in all kinds of weather, Mary prays, "Lord, we know you'll be comin' through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well."

Jim says, "No scholar gets Matthew 25 better than Mary" (*God's Politics*, p. 209–218). Reading Mary Glover's prayer again this week reminded me of one of the quiet realities that has emerged around here as a result of the financial crisis. There is a significant increase in the numbers of people

turning to our Social Service Center for help: for lunch, a bag of groceries, help with housing, a place to stay. These new clients are part of the new poor: just a few months ago employed, able to pay their bills, but today in big trouble.

Jesus said, “All the nations will be gathered at the judgment throne.” This is not only about individual accountability and responsibility; it’s about nations. There’s no way to avoid the complexity and controversy of politics here. Nations are judged on how they deal with their own weakest, most vulnerable citizens—the least of these. So yes, like it or not, national, state, county, and local politics are very much the issue. As we face economic uncertainty and unprecedented deficits and campaign promises to reduce taxes—which means reduced revenue—huge bail-out packages that could end up supplementing executive bonuses, it is a Christian responsibility to remember the least of these: the single mother struggling to make ends meet, the parents with a sick child and no health insurance, the urban children who live in a war zone because of the overwhelming presence of handguns and automatic weapons. Jesus himself insists that it is our responsibility.

The Bible is particularly concerned about the stranger, the other, the immigrant. And among the complex issues facing us, none is more complex and controversial than immigration and the presence of undocumented workers. Immigrants make up 15 percent of the work force. And it is estimated that a third of them are undocumented and thus illegal. One in four farmhands is undocumented. They make up a significant portion of the people who build our houses, cut our lawns, clean our office buildings, and prepare our food.

If they were simply rounded up and deported, as some propose, the economic effects would be a disaster on top of disaster. More importantly from a Christian perspective, it would be a moral disaster. And so in spite of conflict and controversy the development of a new and realistic and humane immigration policy that not only tolerates people who want to live and work here but facilitates and welcomes them is a moral and Christian priority (see Anna Quindlen, “America Needs Its Newcomers,” *Newsweek,* 20 August 2007).

This last story Jesus told actually does more than require a new way of relating to the poor. It redefines God. God is not a remote monarch, off somewhere in the universe watching human history passively. God is here. God is present in the depths of the human condition. God is here in human struggles, passion, hope, striving, loving, living, and dying.

And it redefines righteousness: not as the accumulation of all the wrong you have avoided, but, quite simply, the love and compassion you have given.

And it redefines the very heart of our faith: the incarnation, God come down to dwell among us in the person of Jesus. “That’s just the half of it,” Jesus said. “For I am present wherever there is human need. You will see my face, the face of your savior, in the face of everyone who needs you.” Think of it, the face of Jesus Christ, in the face of the those who are homeless and poor waiting at the Social Service Center or standing on the street corner; the face of Jesus in the abandoned child, the hungry child, the sick child, in the lonely elderly, the sick, the frightened; the face of Jesus closer than that even, in the one who needs your love today—your own child, your own parent, your own spouse, partner, friend. The face of Jesus . . .

“As you did it to the least of these, members of my family, you did it to me,” he said.

Amen.